

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The architectural resources examined in this study are situated along Governors Avenue, from Webbs Lane south to U.S. Route 13, in East Dover Hundred, Kent County. East Dover Hundred is situated in the Upper Peninsula Zone (Herman and Siders 1989:19). Kent County, the middle of Delaware's three counties, contains Dover, the state capital, which is also situated in East Dover Hundred.

East Dover Hundred is bounded on the north by Little Creek Hundred, on the east by the Delaware Bay, on the south by North Murderkill Hundred, and on the west by West Dover Hundred. East Dover Hundred is drained by St. Jones' Creek on the south, and Little Creek on the north. The land in this portion of the state is mostly level or slightly rolling, with loamy gravelly soil, and is capable of a high state of cultivation.

For over two centuries, major portions of Kent County have been used for agricultural purposes. Peaches and pears were grown in great quantities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Scharf 1888:1077). At the beginning of the twentieth century apples replaced peaches as the most important crop in central Delaware. By World War II, wheat, corn, peaches, apples, strawberries, soybeans, and truck crops were still very important agricultural commodities. In 1970, farm products such as fluid milk, soybeans, corn, and potatoes grossed almost 25 million dollars for Kent County (Hancock 1975:35).

Dover, the largest city in central Delaware, mirrored larger cities in growth, population density, and the establishment of residential communities outside the central business district. These planned residential areas outside the urban core became known as suburbs. The suburb evolved in the late nineteenth century in response to the pressures and high population density of the city (Lanier and Herman 1992:252).

Much of Delaware's suburbanization can be linked to improvements in transportation systems, most notably the invention of the automobile and the construction or upgrading of roads to facilitate automobile travel. In 1907, 313 cars were registered in the State of Delaware. By 1914 that number had increased to 3,050 and by 1917, 10,702 cars had been registered (Reed 1947:544). A rapid increase in automobile ownership helped stimulate road improvements throughout the state. In 1917, the Delaware State Highway Department was created to build and maintain a "permanent" modern highway system extending to all corners of the state (Reed 1947:544).

The new highway system was the most important factor in the economic development of rural southern Delaware. The highways gave the farms of Delaware even easier access to markets (Munroe 1979:203). For many years the main road south of Dover led to Camden. In 1919,

the DuPont Parkway (U.S. Route 13) was constructed (Heite and Heite 1986:3). Passing Camden, Seaford, and Laurel on a parallel course with the Delaware Railroad, this new highway encouraged a shift in the location of residential housing and of business construction. As highways became popular, the price of land near them rose; and as the importance of highways increased, land in proximity to railroad lines declined in value. In the north, suburbs grew along all roads leading out of Wilmington, while developments downstate stretched communities into the countryside (Munroe 1979:204).

After World War II the suburban areas of Delaware expanded more rapidly than ever before. Tract housing was the response to the increasing numbers of people moving to suburban areas. Generally, these houses lacked individuality or distinctive architectural character. Built en masse, they were affordable because prefabricated or mass-produced materials were used which helped to keep overall costs low.

Since 1950, Kent County has been transformed from a rural area surrounding the state capital into an urban complex which includes a large air force base, a food processing plant, and other major industries (Hancock 1975:38). The Mall at Rodney Village, on south Governors Avenue, was one of the first malls constructed in the Dover vicinity; it was built adjacent to the planned residential development known as Rodney Village. Today, both U.S. Route 13 and U.S. Route 113 through Dover are lined with an endless variety of commercial strip malls, gas stations, and motels.

Previous research in the project area vicinity undertaken by Heite and Heite (1986) provided the basis for a report entitled *Historical Background Report of Cooper's Corner, Near Dover, Kent County, Delaware*, and Heite also prepared a report on Moore's Lake. Killinger, Kise, Franks, and Straw (1985) completed an *Architectural Investigation of the U.S. Route 13 Relief Route*. None of these reports identified resources within the current project area or dealt specifically with the portion of south Governors Avenue now under investigation.

DELAWARE COMPREHENSIVE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN

The *Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan* defines four geographic zones for the State of Delaware, identifying important themes and property types likely to be found within each zone. The Governors Avenue project area, situated in East Dover Hundred, is located in the Upper Peninsula Zone.

All of the architectural resources identified within the project area date to the period of Urbanization and Early Suburbanization 1880-1940±. Within the Governors Avenue project area, the following themes are applicable for the time period established in the Upper Peninsula Zone: Settlement Patterns and Demographic Change, and Architecture.

The *Delaware Comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan* states that the survival rates for property types within this time period are most notable in and around urban and suburban communities. Direct threats to resources relevant to the study themes for this period take the

form of increased suburban development, continued loss of agricultural land, transportation improvements, and the economic decline of central business districts. The architectural integrity of resources identified within this period should be critically evaluated due to the fact that very little cultural resource survey documentation currently exists for resources within this period (Herman and Siders 1989:35).

HISTORIC CONTEXTS AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN THE GOVERNORS AVENUE PROJECT AREA

1. Settlement Patterns and Demographic Change

In 1683, William Penn laid out his plan for the town of Dover, which was to serve as the seat of government for Kent County. After the Revolutionary War Dover became the new state capital of Delaware, and in 1829 Dover was incorporated as a town (Delaware State Historic Preservation Office 1977). One hundred years later, in 1929, a new charter was granted for Dover and a City Manager form of government was established (Dover Public Library 1983:38). As the government seat, Dover's population increased from 1,289 in 1860 to 3,329 by 1900. As of 1990 the population of Dover was 27,630 (Dover City Hall).

As in the rest of the country, the suburbanization of Delaware occurred in a three-stage process which began in the late nineteenth century as an alternative to the pressures and high population density of the city. During the first stage, which lasted until approximately 1940, the suburbs were primarily bedroom communities dependent upon central cities.

The rise of suburbs in the nineteenth century and the very early twentieth century was almost entirely dependent on the abilities of entrepreneurs and communities to finance and support the relatively costly infrastructure required for railroad and streetcar/trolley systems. Such systems generally followed earlier established routes out of city centers. To be successful, residential development engendered by these transportation systems had to be located close to principal routes along which lines were run, essentially no further than the reasonable walking distance of a mile.

The proliferation of the automobile in the 1920s made geographical proximity between work and home largely immaterial. The extension of roads beyond city centers encouraged the development of fringe or agricultural land for residential purposes. During this time period it was not unusual for farmsteads to be subdivided into small lots and sold individually. Housing became more affordable through simplification of design, reduction in square footage, and generous financing terms offered by numerous mass-market, mail-order housing firms. As a result, home ownership was made available to nearly everyone.

The second stage of suburbanization occurred in the early 1940s when veterans returning from World War II sought affordable housing. The third stage of suburbanization, which continues today, began in the late 1960s, when suburban communities began to provide many of their own goods and services. As the suburbs gained their own shopping centers and community facilities,

they became more self sufficient, less dependent on the central city, and in many ways more urban (Lanier and Herman 1992:253-254).

If the greatest factor contributing to growth in the employment and residential populations of Dover during the early twentieth century was the fact that Dover was the state capital, then the second greatest contribution to growth was the opening of the Dover Air Force Base in 1941. The Dover Air Force Base was built on 587 acres of farmland, purchased by the City of Dover as a public airport, and became a military airfield ten days after the United States entered World War II in 1941 (Dover Public Library 1983:146; Sarnack and Winslow 1967:63). In 1946 the Dover Air Force Base closed, but in 1951, due to the Korean War, it was reactivated. Since this time it has remained open and operational, employing a large number of military personnel and civilians (Dover Public Library 1983:146). The reopening of the Dover Air Force Base created a need for more affordable housing units and services in the Dover vicinity.

During the 1960s Dover grew rapidly, encompassing over 8,000 acres by 1969. This growth was largely a result of annexations encouraged by a city policy of withholding city services from areas outside its boundaries (Norman Day Associates 1986:1-1). Throughout its history Dover has remained a city surrounded by agricultural lands. As the city suburbanized, and as larger highways and commercialism increased, the surrounding agricultural lands have been encroached upon.

Maps of the project area in 1906, 1956, and 1993 illustrate the growth that has occurred in the Dover vicinity. As of 1906, there were only three properties, possibly farmhouses or outbuildings, in the project area (Figure 2). By 1956, the east side of Governor's Avenue from Webbs Lane south to U.S. Route 13 contained about 16 properties, consisting of residences dating from the 1910s to the 1940s (including a number of residences built on lots subdivided out of a former farm property), and the first stage of the planned development, known as Rodney Village, had just been completed (Figure 3). At the present time, ten of the 16 residences on the east side of Governor's Avenue in the project area remain, although all but three have been converted to commercial uses, and the older buildings are now interspersed with modern enterprises such as a gas station and fast-food emporia. The Rodney Village development was completed in 1960.

Property Types Within the Project Area: Craftsman property type; Minimal Traditional property type; Suburb property type.

2. Architecture

Coincident with the popularization of the automobile and the expansion of residential construction into locations heretofore agrarian or otherwise "undeveloped" was the proliferation of a wide range of mass-market, "affordable" houses, made so by their small size, standardized plans, and standardized materials and finishes. Bungalows and other Craftsman-style dwellings,

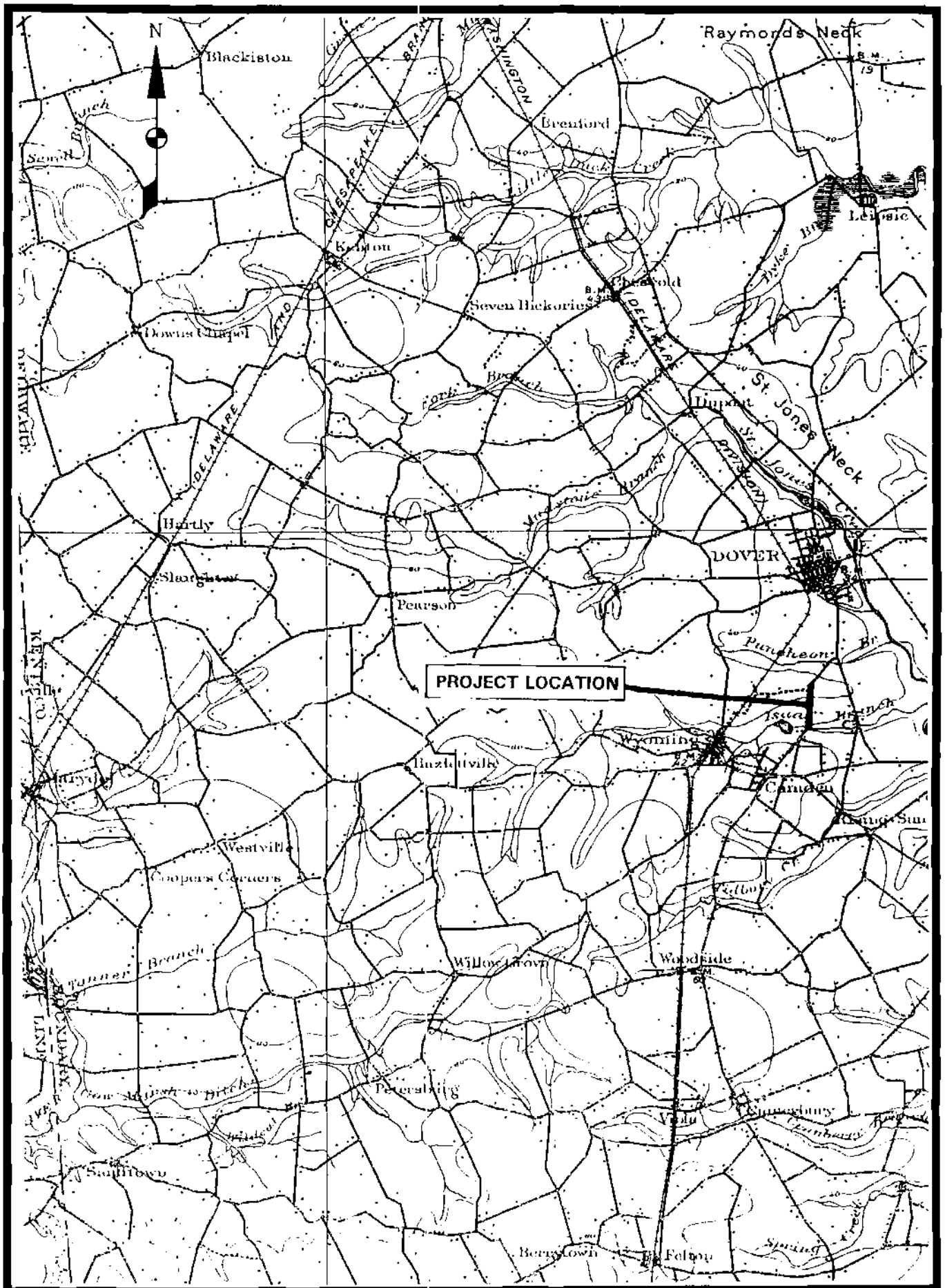


FIGURE 2: Dover Vicinity 1906

SOURCE: USGS Dover, DE-MD-N.J. Quadrangle (reprinted 1929)

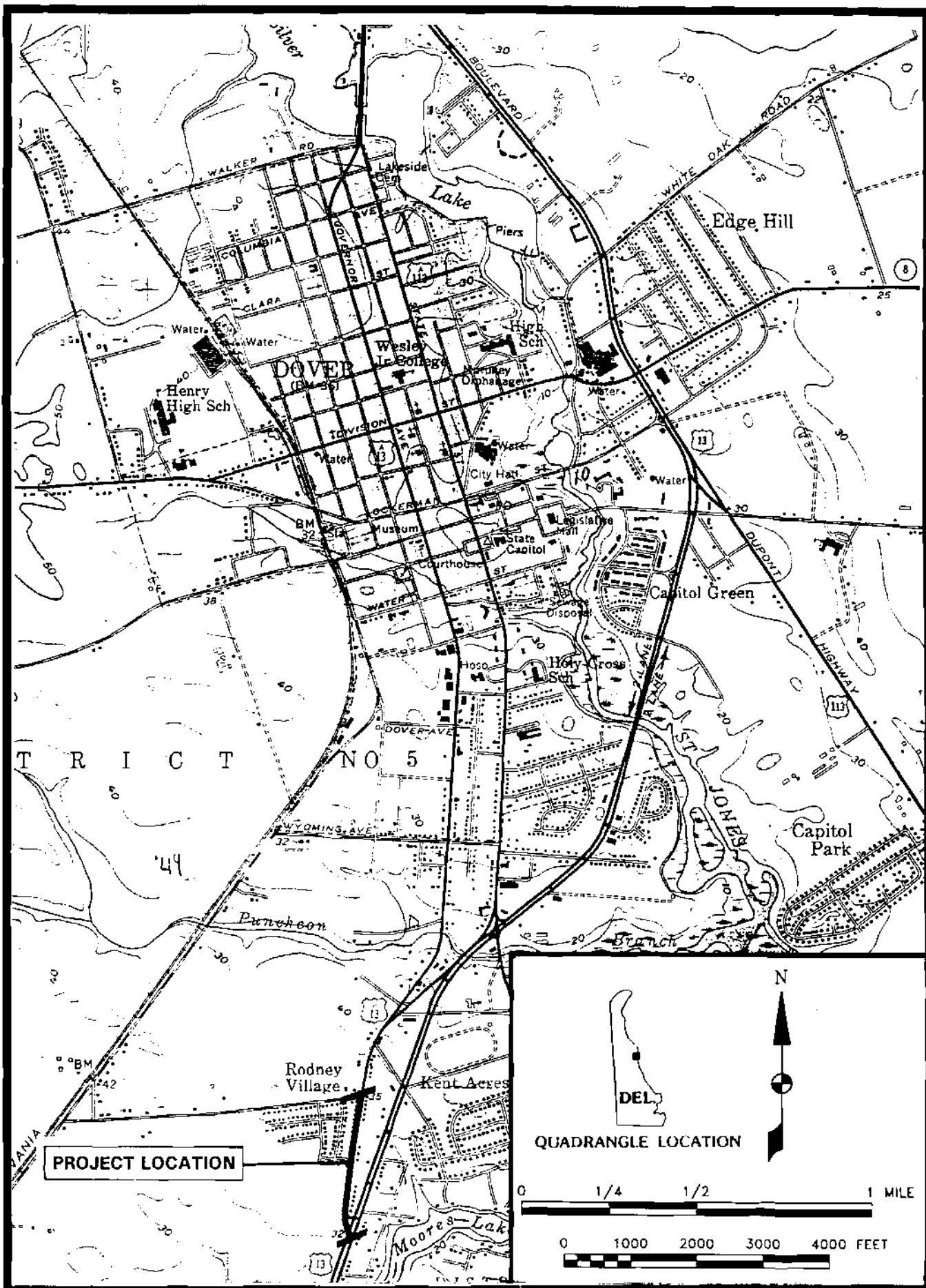


FIGURE 3: Dover Vicinity 1956

SOURCE: USGS 7.5 Minute Series, Dover, DE. Quadrangle (1956)

characterized by low profiles, open plans, and straightforward use of materials, achieved particular popularity during the first three decades of the twentieth century, along with, to a lesser extent, simplified versions of period revival styles such as Georgian, Tudor, French Country, Dutch, and Mediterranean/Spanish. Although smaller than their late Victorian counterparts, such dwellings were well constructed and easily furnished with the latest conveniences, such as bathrooms, electricity, and central heating, and often came with a matching garage.

When residential construction resumed after the hiatus enforced by the Depression and the world war, costs of labor and materials resulted in still smaller dwellings of the type termed Minimal Traditional by McAlester and McAlester (1989:477). These dwellings, characterized by economies in both floor space and exterior and interior detail, constituted, in effect, extremely stripped-down versions of Eclectic Revival styles prevalent in the previous decades, particularly the "Georgian" or Classical Revival, "Cape," and "Tudor". These small house forms were largely supplanted by the Ranch style by the end of the 1960s.

Property Types Within the Project Area: Craftsman property type; Minimal Traditional property type.